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AUTHOR Gunning, Ann F.
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ABSTRACT

Although it is not without flaws, decentralization of the school administration--returning decision-making power to school principals and classroom teachers--can contribute to a return to humanistic education and to the elimination of assembly-line education. Researchers, curriculum developers, and educational publishers can help in this movement by keeping in mind a number of factors when designing reading programs. (1) The principal is the key to the quality of the instructional program; research must be translated into appropriate materials that will create a support system for principals. (2) Reading materials must be less rigid and must have high intrinsic appeal. (3) Reading materials must allow for more individualization and for more freedom in a child's approach to learning in school. (4) Teachers need a testing program that capitalizes on strengths and diminishes weaknesses. (5) Suggestions for record keeping would assist teachers in developing their observation skills and would help them sort out pertinent information about children's skills. (6) Training materials for paraprofessionals are badly needed. (7) Suggestions for how to review curriculum materials would be helpful to principals and teachers. (LJR)

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SCHOOL ORGANIZATION AND IMPLEMENTATION FACTORS IN THE DESIGN OF READING INSTRUCTION

A Paper
Presented at the 1976 Annual Meeting
of the American Educational Research
Association

Ann F. Gunning
Curriculum Director - Ithaca City School District

San Francisco, California
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This paper's topic, "School Organization and Implementation Factors in the Design of Reading Instruction," should be understood in terms of what the "real" world wants the researchers, the developers of curriculum, and the educational publishers to consider as they prepare instructional materials for teachers and students to use in the reading program. Instead of considering "The real world" solely in terms of school organizational factors and existing teaching practices, this paper will begin with the consideration of children as a prime factor in the reading program design.

If we continue to organize schools, to design programs and to offer schooling in direct conflict with our knowledge of children and how they learn, we will continue to foster the problem, and impede the solution.

Our national obsession with cognitive development as measured by test scores, seems to be nurtured by the schools, the researchers and the publishers. We rank and rate children, rewarding and stigmatizing them according to their ability to do well on miniscule tasks that schools can measure quantitatively. Humanistic schools and humanistic curriculum are still not the goals of education today. We have a professed but uncommitted devotion to human needs and the improvement of a quality of life, which values physical vitality, caring, imagination, recourcefulness, cooperation and moral commitment, yet we continue to seek and use mechanisms to sort individuals

into slots. We have allowed quantitative standards, which are central to our economic and highly developed technology, to become the yardstick of a child's worth.

As educators, our practices contradict our knowledge of children and how they learn; we do not provide the educational environment that recognizes children as organic wholes who think, act and feel in the same moment.

As program designers, we prepare programs as though children develop in an assembly line fashion, one part at a time until the product is complete.

As researchers, we focus on part of the whole and foster one-sided perceptions that force program designers, publishers and teachers to lose sight of the total sense of children.

If we agree with Vincent Rogers' view that teaching children and organizing schools should be based on the best evidence that is currently available, it would seem that we must make a concerted effort to resolve the conflicting ideologies purporting to know what is good for children. Instead of relying on unsupported data that gives credence to the goals and objectives of these ideologies, we should develop long-term research studies. We must avoid basing instruction on crass generalizations. Resulting instruction can only be non-essential and will be difficult - if not impossible - to reform or revise.

Moore and Carricker in the March 1974 Phi Delta Kappan stated that educators are not willing to accept and use research findings, no matter how they are packaged, because they resist research as a concept.

Walter McGinitie in the Reading Research Quarterly 1975-1976, Vol. 10, #1, in his research, suggests that "for research to be translated into more effective teaching, it may be necessary for research to be done on the translation process itself: what are the processes by which research results influence instruction, or fail to influence it when it seems they should?" Further, he poses an important question, does research influence instruction, by asking, who takes the research results and uses them as guides in building instructional programs, and where do the respective responsibilities of the teachers and the researchers end? Who can disseminate the research and lay out clear and definite alternative procedures? Clearly, the ideology that a child's worth is measured by his cognitive development and test scores has prevailed. Unnoticed and unheralded is the research by Roger Farr and his associates, which states, "We are convinced that anyone who says he knows that literacy is decreasing is ignoring data. Such a person is at best unscholarly and at worst dishonest." This study, "Reading Achievement in the U. S. - Then and Now", as reported in the Journal of Reading, Vol. 19, #5, March 1976, also states that "despite a multi-million dollar testing business, few longitudinal and easily accessible records on the performance of children exist."

In school organization, however, something is happening that may assist those of us who have a commitment to marry the school's program with the child.

Administrative decentralization in decision-making is on the upswing. In a recent article in Educational Leadership, 50% of school districts surveyed were moving toward decentralized decision-making.

The study examined 10 issues or key decision areas in the operation of schools. It reported that building level personnel had the most influence on all issues. These included selection of basic reading materials, inservice programs, selection of personnel (including the principal), staffing patterns, organizing school for instruction, and curriculum modification.

Growing interest in placing decision-making closer to the client should have far-reaching impact on efforts to provide appropriate materials and programs for teachers and children.

It suggests a changing role for central administrators, curriculum specialists, principals, teachers, students and parents, whether the decentralization is purely administrative or includes community participation and/or community control. Key to the degree of shared ownership or power in this organizational pattern, however, is the redistribution of resources, insuring implementation of local decision-making.

In a 1975 publication of ASCD - Impact of Decentralization on Curriculum - several studies were presented on this trend. The resulting viewpoints underscored a commonality of practices and problems relating to curriculum and program.

1. Decentralization has given the local unit or school the flexibility and autonomy to develop its own instructional program.

2. It is generally unclear by whom and/or on what level within the school district curriculum development activity is initiated.

3. In decentralized districts there are few mechanisms or strategies for diffusing new instructional programs, for helping teachers learn what new materials are available and for helping them modify their teaching practices.

4. The increased mobility of students within the local school systems has caused some districts to return to more standard district-wide programs.

Apparently decentralization fosters ambiguity. As reflected by the problems noted above, it seems that unless the problems are resolved, decentralization will foster the status quo, rather than the review, renewal and regeneration, of program. On the other hand, if we agree with Goodlad that "the single school is the largest and proper unit for educational change" decentralization, at least, provides the setting and resources to encourage self-renewal.

Under the leadership of a "futurist" superintendent, this author's own district began its move toward administrative decentralization in 1968. A consolidated small city school district, it covers an area of 155 square miles and serves approximately 8000 students. It is a microcosm of the total educational scene, reflecting trends and problems noted in both

large city and urban districts, as well as small town and rural communities.

The superintendent's strategy for administrative decentralization appeared to be in response to students' and parents' demands for a greater voice in decisions affecting education in the community, a justification given by most other districts for change to decentralization. In reality, however, the leadership used this justification of responsiveness to legitimize and foster a strong administrative philosophical view that:

1. Educational alternatives must be provided for students.

2. The teacher's function must change from a dispenser of knowledge to a facilitator of learning.

3. The central office and curriculum personnel exist to serve the principals and their staffs as they, in turn, provide an educational environment and program responsive to the needs of the students in the community.

A monumental budget crisis accelerated the change and was used as the "cover" for the process of decentralization.

Principals were allocated staff and resources for all programs on a per-pupil basis. Drastically depleted funds were distributed to the schools, while only pupil personnel services were distributed from the central office. Principals and staffs could organize the building and program as they wished. Services of special area teachers, use of para-professionals, choice of programs and materials were decided

at the building level. Even resources for custodial services and building maintenance materials could be channeled into teaching staff and instructional materials, if the staff so decided.

During the years that followed the initiation of decentralization, each problem that emerged was addressed in light of the three above stated administrative philosophical themes. This approach to district problems alleviated, to a great degree, two problems cited in the ASCD publication on decentralization, level of initiation of curriculum development, and student mobility.

Initiation of curriculum development and curriculum activity was encouraged at all levels, particularly at the building and classroom levels. A support system was established through building principals' agreement to pool some of the resources allocated to their schools. These became research and development funds administered by the Curriculum Director. Individual teachers, building staff, cross building or grade level staff, and principals were encouraged to develop proposals for curriculum improvement and staff development. These would be screened by a principals' committee, reviewed by building staff and approved or disapproved for funding by the principals. The scope of proposals covered the full range of curriculum and staff development topics.

Installation of Man: A Course of Study in several schools, including staff training and purchase of materials, values clarification workshops for staff of one building, development of a teacher resource center for the district,

purchase of a station wagon for field trips in the developing community-as-a-classroom program, exemplify the range of activity. Everyone had an opportunity to initiate activity - everyone had a chance to review and evaluate the proposals before final approval of the project.

Project success, however, was not measured by the test scores of the students. The criteria for review were based on the belief that teachers and children perform best when what they do is something they choose to do.

The problem of students encountering different reading programs as they moved within the district needed to be addressed. Thirteen elementary schools, spread over 155 square miles, feeding into two junior high schools, a 17% economically disadvantaged student population and a mobile college community population added to the complexity of program articulation for these students.

The Board of Education's reaction to these developments reflected community and national concern about reading and student achievement. They viewed a diversity of materials and a variety of teaching styles, simplistically, as the cause of the problem. What the research has confirmed over and over again about children's learning and effective teaching was completely ignored or not accepted as significant or important by this "back to basics" ground swell.

Vocal partisan views within the community, expressing reaction to uneasy social conditions and to growing frustration

with governmental and instructional bureaucracies, were publicly discussed. In response, the Board issued a special order: review of the district's reading program. The charge was general enough to represent the variety of hidden agendas within the Board and within the community.

Some hoped that the review would find the one and only reading program that "works", others expected it would ferret out incompetent teachers, still others wanted it to pinpoint poor administration, thus documenting the need to return to a strong centralized school system.

After six rocky years, the leadership, because of its firm commitment to an administrative philosophy, withstood the test, was able to actually address an important and needed element of decentralized decision-making in the instructional reading program.

Supported by central office administrators, building level principals and their staffs developed parent involvement programs to provide a vehicle for understanding and involvement in program planning at the local building level. A district-wide reading committee of teachers, administrators and parents was formed to review the district reading program. Leadership and support for this effort were provided at the central office level, with the Curriculum Director assigned to serve as project leader.

Using techniques for total staff involvement, the staff on the district committee, supported by representatives from each building, developed an agreed-upon list of basic reading skills, instructional objectives for the skills, and criterion

test items for the objectives. At thc same time they were correlating the skills list with the major reading programs in use in the district, developing a student record form and preparing guidelines for teachers to use in the placement of students and choice of materials. Presently over eighty teachers are working on various sub-committees, each directed by one of their number. The Curriculum Director and building principals serve as resources to each committee.

In actuality the devclopment of a district skills list and record keeping format is a strategy to promote the recognition and support of individualized programs for students and serves to capitalize on teachers' abilities to examine students' needs and provide appropriate learning environments. Committee efforts have resulted in the development of tools for teachers, rather than shackles for children.

Eight years of involvement in the process of de-centralizing decision-making toward a goal of improving education for the children of the community offers a wealth of experience and insights. Limiting the view, however, from the standpoint of program design and from the view of school-organizational factors, the following points suggest themselves.

1. The principal is key to the quality of the instructional program in all schools. Program researchers and developers must apply their efforts to identify those principals who are effective leaders of reading programs. Research must be translated for program developers in order

to design appropriate materials that will create a support system for principals. Principals need service, information, and skills in order to provide the leadership for managing the program at the building level.

2. Teachers in all schools are asking for reading materials that have more flexibility, are less rigid, and have high intrinsic appeal. Research and the literature agree that the teacher, and not the material, is the main ingredient in a child's reading progress. But, it is the effective teacher who wants and needs effective material.

The effective teachers in the University of Texas study, (which will be cited later), were successful classroom managers in that their assignments to students were interesting, varied, and attuned to the abilities of students. Students' work was individualized and appropriate, recognizing, that different children and even the same children at different levels of development require different treatment for optimal results. It would seem that:

3. "Seatwork" must be examined by developers. It must be planned, not for teachers, who coined the phrase, but for children. Developers must provide choices which are, whenever possible, open-ended options. Developers need to ask of their programs, "Do these materials foster group norms and group expectancies despite our claim that our goal is to provide materials for individualizing instruction?"

In More Than Joy: What Does Research Say About Open Education, Lyn Martin, New York Agathon, 1976, indicates children who have independence and self-direction will develop

higher achievement motivation, have fewer discipline problems, and will learn more effectively. Process materials, discovery approach and Piagetian curriculum foster internality, and internalizing appears to be an indication of school and later life success. Therefore:

4. These ideas are compelling reasons for developers of program to help the teachers, through the use of reading materials, to allow more freedom in a child's approach to learning in school. It has been amply demonstrated that children who direct their own learning achieve as well on standardized tests as traditionally taught groups.

5. Many teachers view programs imbedded with pre and post testing and other monitoring devices as tools that measure them rather than the students.

This author's experience is supported by Brophy and Evertson in the book, Learning From Teacher - A Developmental Perspective, published by Allyn & Bacon, 1976. This publication details a two-year study conducted by the Research and Development Center for Teaching Education, University of Texas, Austin. The study, entitled, The Texas Teacher Effectiveness Project, using cognitive criteria, examined teacher effectiveness as determined by student learning gains on standardized norm referenced achievement tests.

The researchers found that teachers who said they were least concerned about standardized achievement tests and the scores of children on tests were the most successful in producing learning gains as measured by the tests. Testing simply supported what teachers already knew from experience based

on observation of student work, and a working knowledge of skills their students "should" know. Few saw testing as important and few tested formally very often. This leads us to consider:

5. This dilemma - student testing seen as a teacher evaluation tool by some, and, as a confirmation tool of what teachers already know by others, should be taken into account by the developer of the reading program. Can we do for teachers what everyone professes that we do for students - provide a program that capitalizes on strengths and diminishes weaknesses?

6. Program developers should also include suggestions in their materials for record keeping. This would assist teachers in developing their observation skills and would help them sort out pertinent information about children's skills. In turn, this would help teachers make appropriate decisions for instruction and program.

Researchers and program developers should examine the work of the North Dakota Study Group on Evaluation. Several publications detail the efforts of this group of educators who have addressed themselves to concerns about the use of narrow accountability themes and activity which dominate our schools. Their suggestions and ideas respond closer to most teachers' needs, documenting and assessing children's learning, than do criterian referenced and standardized testing. The study goes further, suggesting a re-examination of a range of evaluation issues and perspectives about schools and schooling.

7. Paraprofessionals and volunteer parents are heavily involved in school programs, particularly in the reading program. Sample training materials

designed to increase paraprofessional and parent understanding particularly as it relates to reading skills are sorely needed. Principals and teachers could also make use of these materials in a variety of ways.

8. All major developers and publishers should "get together" to develop a materials review format that, in itself, could be used as an inservice activity in districts examining new reading materials. Developers and planners cooperatively planning a checklist of program elements, would provide building principals and teachers with knowledge and understanding of the varying focuses and emphases of programs they review.

   There is constant reference in the literature concerning the pervasive lack of stated philosophies, and goals of education at the school district, as well as building, level. This tool, or format as suggested above, might prove an excellent strategy for district and building level committees to address their own internal differences in philosophies concerning children's learning and what school is all about, particularly as it relates to the reading program.

In summary, researchers and publishers who are committed to translation of their efforts into more effective teaching and learning, must focus their efforts toward supporting the efforts and skills of principals and teachers. This paper purposely did not discuss what reading skills to teach, or methods to use in teaching reading. The literature and research in this area is overwhelming: it would seem that researchers

and developers have abetted school people in losing sight of the place of the reading program and reading goals for children. Unfortunately, our concentration on the minutia of learning, and in particular of learning to read, has convinced the children that school does not relate to their "real" world.

Let us join in our efforts to perpetrate the ripple effects of recent significant changes that have taken place in the education of children. Let us support alternatives in the school organization, instruction, and learning materials. Let us seek ways in all our efforts to develop effective teachers as managers of children's learning and the learning environments. Let us keep before us a notion of close relationship between schooling and the total life of the community.

If our collective insights could focus on improving the quality of life for our children, the national obsession with testing and the subsequent spin-off activities in our classrooms might give way to a rising spirit and vitality in American education.

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